

NEWS FOR COMMUNITY AGENCIES WORKING WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE

From Health Care for the Homeless Network

A Community Project of Public Health - Seattle & King County

For Seattle-King County Area Shelters, Day Centers, Housing Programs, and Service Programs

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Cold, Cough, & Flu Season: Protecting Your Clients & Staff

Once again it's that time of year when many clients and staff in your homeless assistance program are coughing. Get to know the potential culprits:

The Common Cold. Characterized by runny nose, sneezing, mild fatigue, cough, and sore throat. Caused by a virus.

The Flu. Characterized by headaches, fevers, chills, body aches, fatigue, cough, sore throat, and a sudden onset. Caused by a virus.

Tuberculosis. Characterized by chronic cough (lasting more than 3 weeks), weight loss, fatigue, night sweats, and fever. Many cases have been confirmed in Seattle single adult programs this year, so stay vigilant. Caused by bacteria.

Pertussis (whooping cough). Characterized by coughing and gagging with little or no fever. An infected person has cough episodes that may end in vomiting or cause a "whoop" sound when the person breathes in. A few cases have been confirmed in family shelters in King County recently. *Pertussis is most dangerous to infants less than 1 year old and to women in the latter part of their pregnancy, as they can infect their newborns.* Serious complications are less likely in older children and adults. Caused by bacteria.

All of the above can be spread to others through coughing and sneezing.

What Can Staff of Homeless Agencies Do?

1. **Get a flu shot** and encourage your clients to get a flu shot. Flu shots are also recommended for infants ages 6-24 months and for children with chronic health conditions. In addition, people over age 65 who haven't had a **pneumonia shot** in the last 10 years should get a pneumonia shot.
2. **Ask clients to cover their cough.**
 - Provide supplies of tissues and/or masks (the basic, cheap blue surgical style mask), and advertise their availability to your clients.
 - Provide frequent, plastic-lined wastebaskets in your facility for used tissues and masks.
 - Keep a supply of gloves for staff to use when picking up used tissues or emptying wastebaskets.
 - Educate parents to avoid exposing their children – try to stay away from people who are coughing.
 - Make and post signs about coughing (see page 3 for examples).

3. Promote good hand hygiene among staff, clients and volunteers.

- Wash hands with soap and running warm water after handling any body substance, after using the toilet, after changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food.
- Keep bathrooms well stocked with soap and paper towels.
- Alcohol-based hand rubs are useful for cleaning hands. If possible, consider installing some dispensers of these hand rubs right on the shelter or day center floor.
- Advise clients to avoid touching their face: the eyes, nose and mouth are portals of entry for viral infections such as colds and the flu.

4. Consider the physical environment.

- Try to clean surfaces with a sanitizing cleanser on a more regular basis during cold and flu season. Pay particular attention to cleaning those doorknobs, banisters, tabletops, and handrails.
- If possible and weather permitting, open windows to promote good air circulation (unless your facility has a special ventilation system for TB control purposes).
- In shelters, allow as much space as possible between clients and try to position clients head to toe.

5. Identify sick clients and help them get evaluated by a health care provider.

- Ensure your intake form includes key health status questions. Need help tweaking your form? Call HCH public health nurse Heather Barr at (206) 296-4656.
- Pay attention to *changes* in the health of your clients. Be particularly alert to those who are doing poorly, not getting better, or have a chronic cough.
- Bring sick or coughing clients to the attention of your on-site nurse, if your facility has this service, or help sick clients get to their doctor, a community clinic, a public health clinic, Harborview, or other hospital.

6. Educate your coughing clients about what to expect when visiting the doctor: the “Respiratory Etiquette” measures.

- Explain to your clients that health care facilities are often providing tissues or masks in waiting rooms, and your client should use them if provided.
- Explain to your clients that health care providers will likely wear a mask if the client has respiratory symptoms.

7. Keep daily attendance logs at shelters and day centers.

- Keep daily records of clients and staff on site. Be sure to date the log.
- Include first and last names. Ensure the list is legible.
- Retain the lists for 6 months if possible, but at least 3 months (important for TB investigations).

8. Help children access health care and immunizations.

- Help homeless families and children get established with a health care provider. Pertussis is a vaccine preventable disease, and a health care provider can help a homeless family ensure that kids are up-to-date on their immunizations. Immunizations for children are available at Public Health department clinics.

8. Work with Public Health.

- If a case of TB or pertussis is identified at your facility, Public Health staff will need to work closely with your organization. We may ask to see attendance logs, make special recommendations, and institute certain measures to prevent diseases from spreading to others. We appreciate your help.

SAMPLE POSTERS YOU CAN MAKE AND POST AT YOUR FACILITY (tailor as needed)

FLU SEASON IS HERE!

- Please cover your mouth when you cough.
- Coughing spreads colds, tuberculosis (TB), and the flu.

PLEASE COVER YOUR COUGH!

- If you are coughing frequently, please ask a staff person for a mask or tissues.
- Thanks for helping prevent the spread of colds, tuberculosis (TB), and the flu.

TUBERCULOSIS (TB) SPREADS THROUGH COUGHING

- Please cover your mouth when you cough
- Please use a tissue or a mask to cover your cough

DO YOU HAVE TUBERCULOSIS (TB) SYMPTOMS?

- A chronic cough lasting more than 3 weeks?
- Weight loss?
- Night sweats lasting more than 3 weeks?
- Fever lasting more than 3 weeks?
- Bloody phlegm or sputum?

If so, please talk to a staff person who will help you see a nurse or other health care provider.

- TB is treatable and curable
- Treatment for TB is free

Want to learn more about TB? Visit <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/tb/>

Want to learn more about Pertussis? Visit <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/prevcont/pertussis.htm>

Please let Health Care for the Homeless/Public Health know how we can help you. How can we help you make your program a healthier and safer place for staff and clients? Let us know how it's going and what you need. Call us at (206) 296-5091. *As always, feel free to contact Health Care for the Homeless Network's public health nurse, Heather Barr, at (206) 296-4656 for more information and technical assistance.*

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS NETWORK is a community project of Public Health—Seattle & King County. We contract with partner agencies to send care providers to work with homeless people in over 60 locations countywide, including shelters, day centers, transitional housing programs, and clinics. Services offered include primary care, mental health and substance abuse services, and case management. Public Health clinics and programs also provide care for homeless people. **Administrative office: Public Health—Seattle & King County, 999 Third Avenue, Suite 1200, Seattle WA 98014. (206) 296-5091.**